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## THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREEK FATHERS.<sup>1</sup>

IN the writings of the later sophists Greek prose more and more degenerates into a breathless hunt for stately similes, a wearisome piling up of scintillating epithets. Even with the noble Dion Chrysostom, in whom the thinker and the rhetorician are about evenly matched, one longs at times for the naked simplicity of an Epictetus; and in the orations of Ælius Aristides the passages are but too soon counted in which the author's style rises above the mere tinkling of a cymbal.

New blood was infused into the decrepit literature of Greece when, in the fourth century, its devotees in great numbers turned Christians. The story of the Greek Fathers almost invariably runs on the same lines. A young man, son of Christian parents, but himself lukewarm in the faith—perhaps no Christian at all—makes his course of studies and enters upon some worldly career, that of a lawyer, for instance, or a rhetorician. After some years of this vocation he falls in with a fervent Christian, frequently a pious woman, whose zeal strikes fire from his soul. He abandons everything worldly, becomes a monk, priest, bishop perhaps—the last generally against his own wish.<sup>2</sup> But whatever his work, in whatever place, high or low, his lot be cast, the stamp of *the school* remains upon him, the rhetorician's cloak is never shaken off his shoulders. Only this should not be understood as though these men were shallow triflers, or at best only brilliant artists in words. Far from

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<sup>1</sup> Although the wording of the title ought to be unambiguous enough, it may not be wholly superfluous here to emphasize that the writer's aim has been solely and exclusively to define the literary merits and failings of the Fathers, leaving their theology, as such, undiscussed.

<sup>2</sup> See the lives of St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, etc.

it! Truth to tell, their life is endowed with a beauty much more real than that of their literary work. At the gates of Cæsarea, the episcopal see of Basil, a whole little town sprang up, consisting of buildings where the poor might find shelter; travelers, rest; sick people, nursing. Even lepers were there taken care of; the bishop himself would move among them, kiss them, and attend to their wants.<sup>1</sup> St. John Chrysostom was truly the father of the poor in Constantinople; his sermons abound in burning appeals in their behalf. No modern bishop ever dared use such language to the rich of his diocese. And with Chrysostom words mirrored deeds, as deeds mirrored words.<sup>2</sup> Much of what is told of Gregory Nazianzen possesses a peculiar fascination. The depth of his affections, especially of his friendship for Basil, the poetical, slightly melancholy strain running through his character, which repeatedly drives him away from the cities and the multitude, out where he may be alone, face to face with nature and with God—all of this strangely recalls another great charmer of hearts and master of words, who, fifteen centuries later, fell under the same spell as he, lived and died much like him.<sup>3</sup>

But somehow the art of these men—literary production with them always was more or less of an art—is not quite so attractive as their lives. To be sure, the greatest of them, St. Athanasius, frequently, as in his “Oration to the Pagans,” proceeds with a mighty sweep, an irresistible impetus, which his sober, tightly knit diction fits as the flexible mail coat did the mediæval warrior. But all the other Greek Fathers loved their rhetoric just a trifle too well. There is, indeed, their own word for it that they did love it exceedingly. To them it was all but divine. “Everything else will I leave you,” Gregory Nazianzen cries out

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, Or. 39; Basil, Ep. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Homil., 50 and 64 in Matth.

<sup>3</sup> John Henry Newman. Compare, for instance, Gregory's second oration, § 7, with the oft-quoted passage of Newman, where he speaks of his “rest in the thought of two and two only, absolute and luminously self-evident beings—myself and my Creator.”

to the pagans "wealth, high birth, fame, honor, and all the treasures of the earth, whose charms vanish like a dream; but rhetoric I do lay claim to, nor do I regret the trouble and labor, the travels by land and sea, which I had to undertake to become master of it. I clung to it, and still I cling to it, next to what is the foremost of all things—I mean the divine, and the hope of the invisible."<sup>1</sup> Basil wrote a whole treatise to the same effect. Rhetoric had indeed become part and parcel of these men's nature. Unfortunately, rhetoric at that late hour preferred stilts to shoes and artificial flowers to those that grow in the fields. Who that is familiar with Ælius Aristides' style, and the kite's tails of epithets he tacks on to the subjects of his admiration, would fail to be reminded of him when the Bishop of Cæsarea describes the Trinity as "a ring, adorable in its eternal glory, containing ever the same divinity, and one alone; unbroken, undivided, unsevered, filling all, existing in all, creating, sustaining, sanctifying, and animating."<sup>2</sup> Or when Gregory Nazianzen takes one's breath away by defining baptism as nothing short of "the soul's light and splendor, life's transformation, the root of a good conscience, help in weakness, mortification of the flesh, animation of the spirit, participation in Logos, renovation of the creature, the wiping out of sins, the communication of light, the expulsion of darkness, the vessel that takes us to God, the journey with Christ, the illumination of faith, the perfection of the mind, the key to heaven, the improvement of life, the abolition of servitude, the striking off of the fetters, the turning around to what is good."<sup>3</sup>

It is not that the Fathers were unaware of the danger both to themselves and to their audiences in the display of oratorical skill for its own sake. They laid it down as a fundamental principle that sermons should be plain as a peas-

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<sup>1</sup> Or. 4, 100 [in Julian]; *conf.* Or. 6, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Contr. Eunomium*, v., 317.

<sup>3</sup> Or. 40, 30. *Conf.* the same writer's Or. 29, 20; further Gregory Nyssen's Or. in baptism. *Christ* (Migne XLVI., 588 ff.), Chrysost.; *De Resurrectione*; In *Eutropium*, 1 and 2, and numerous others.

ant's speech, humble, and to the point. They admitted that, as Chrysostom expresses himself, there were preachers ever angling for applause, fancying that the kingdom of heaven was theirs as soon as the Church resounded with the clapping of hands, and suffering the agony of the lost when their brilliant tirades were listened to in silence. The criticizing of sermons from a purely literary point of view, and the enthusiasm on the same ground, were, so the Fathers inform us, even rarer in the Christian congregations than at the public contests of pagan sophists.

The trouble was that to the vast majority of those that thronged the churches the dogmas of the Trinity and of the resurrection were little more than a welcome improvement upon the worn-out topics of the sophists' discourses—the greatness of Zeus, the grandeur of Rome, or the beauties of baldness. And however sagely the Fathers themselves might argue while in the cooling atmosphere of the study—once they stood on the platform, with thousands of eager faces in front of them, the intoxication of popularity rose to their heads, and their speech pranced along like a horse with the reins hanging loose. John Chrysostom, who so often spoke of forbidding all applause in his churches, but never carried out this intention, appearing probably none too earnest about it—during one of his sermons applause broke forth just at a fine demonstration of the impropriety of such outbursts<sup>1</sup>—John Chrysostom allowed himself to be carried off by his power of words as much as any of the Fathers. There is a sermon of his in which he praises the empress for coming unexpectedly in the night-time into his church, accompanied by her courtiers, after walking several miles in a procession with some martyrs' relics.<sup>2</sup> This is how it opens:

What shall I say? Of what shall I speak? I exult and am stricken with sacred rage, which is better than wisdom. I fly, I leap, I am raised above everything. I am drunk with spiritual joy! What shall I say? Of what shall I speak? Of the virtue of the martyrs, the zeal of their love, or

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<sup>1</sup> Hom. 30 in Acta Apost.

<sup>2</sup> XII., 330.

the zeal of the empress? Of this assembly of great people, of Satan's shame, of the defeat of the spirits of hell? Of the nobility of the Church, the power of the cross, the wounds of the Crucified One? Of the honor of the Father, the grace of the Holy Ghost, the delight of all the people, the jubilation of the whole city?

In this manner he continues for quite a while, until at last he decides upon speaking of "women who generally stay in their rooms. Such delicate persons! they now leave their houses and vie with the strongest men in holy enthusiasm. They walk such a long distance on foot, . . . and neither the weakness of their nature nor their refined mode of life could keep them back." And thus he goes on until the reader's head is reeling, which indeed comes to pass long before he is through.

But the most curious evidence of a Father's infatuation with his own rhetoric is furnished by something that once befell Gregory Nazianzen. The readers of his autobiographical poem<sup>1</sup> will remember a certain Maximus, whom Gregory styles "another Proteus." He certainly was very changeable. An adept in the cynical philosophy, he at one time professed a great zeal for Christianity, particularly as expounded by Gregory, who then was bishop and a man of influence. Gregory was delighted with the admiring attention of the clever philosopher and rhetorician, who, as he puts it in his poem, with an allusion to the original meaning of the word "cynic," "pursued the infidel mob with his fierce bark." Later Maximus turned on Gregory, revealing a character not only fickle and faithless, but spiteful and venomous to a degree. Gregory had to confess that he had been outrageously deceived, and throughout the affair he had undeniably shown but scant knowledge of human nature. If, however, this had been all, nobody would have found any serious fault on that score with the impressionable bishop. But there existed an oration<sup>2</sup> in which Gregory had called on Maximus to "come forth and approach this sacred place, this mystic table,<sup>3</sup> where I ac-

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<sup>1</sup> "De Vita Sua Carmen."

<sup>2</sup> Or. 45.

<sup>3</sup> The communion table.

comply thy deification in a mysterious manner, . . . that I may adorn thee with wreaths and loudly proclaim thee as victor, not at Olympia, or in a little Grecian theater, but before God and his angels and the whole Church." Besides still more praise in the same solemn strain, the oration contains an abundance of frightful puns on the word "cynic." Maximus is "a dog, not in boldness, but in frankness; not in gluttony, but because he lets to-morrow take care of itself; not on account of his bark, but because he guards the beautiful, and, while barking at every stranger, wags his tail at the friends of virtue."

Now, two courses were open to the author of this eulogy, on finding the subject so woefully unworthy of it: either to destroy it outright, or allow it to go down to posterity with a postscriptum attached, making full acknowledgment of the delusion under which it had been written. But doubtless Gregory feared by the latter device to deprive his eloquence of its flavor; and as for suppressing it altogether, why, would not that have been a crime against all connoisseurs of the rhetorician's noble art, who would thus miss the opportunity of going into ecstasy over the dog that barks at strangers to virtue, but wags its tail at virtue's friends? And so Gregory chose of all the silliest way out of the dilemma: he simply substituted the fictitious name of "Heron" for that of Maximus, in all other respects leaving the oration exactly as it was.

Howbeit it is but a fair and well-founded supposition that in most cases the Fathers performed their literary labors in a spirit of sincere devotion, feeling their hearts beating joyfully while penning what they intended for a humble, though not glaringly inadequate, tribute to the great mysteries of the Christian religion. It is indeed from this view-point that the whole work of the Greek Fathers should be judged. They might be styled a school of rhetoricians let loose upon Christian dogma, but the definition would not be an exhaustive one. They were filled with admiration for the Platonic philosophy as taught by the lecturers of the day, but their laboriously acquired dexterity in the handling of

Platonic terms served them only as a means of elucidating and solidifying the various departments of Christian belief. And precisely for these reasons did they value rhetoric so highly, because by nothing else, or so it seemed to them, might that same belief be as properly and splendidly adorned. In the writings of Plato the Fathers found, as it were, presages of that doctrine of the divine Logos, or Word, which, wrapped in mysterious terms, appears in the opening verse of the Fourth Gospel. In his teaching concerning the pre-existence of the soul, its being destined to behold the higher world, the world of ideas, and its present state of banishment on earth, there was much that they could turn to use in expounding the doctrine of the original state of innocence in paradise, the fall, and the final bliss, when the elect shall see God. Others before them, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, had availed themselves of Greek philosophy to lend definite form to what struck them as obscure hints of profound mysteries in the sacred books of the Jews and the Gospels. Clement called philosophy "the light, the picture of truth, and a gift from God to the Greeks, . . . which educated them, as faith did the Jews, that both might be led to Christ."<sup>1</sup> But the writings of the Greek Fathers were calculated to acquire much more direct importance for the development of the Church's dogmas than those of the Alexandrian theologians. The latter, as a rule, had but to state the leading thoughts of Christianity as against outward enemies—pagans, or gnostics, who were themselves at least three-fourth pagans. Far different was the one great task before the Greek Fathers—namely, that of purifying the Church from within by driving out of it false teachers, men glorying in the name of Christians, albeit failing in their perception of the proper homage to be rendered unto Christ.

There was the priest Arius, who averred that the Son of God, Logos, was created out of nothing, not begotten from eternity, thus lowering the dignity of Christ. This heresy

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<sup>1</sup> Clemens Alex. *Stromata* I., 5, 6.



was widely discussed, and for a time by dint of persistent agitation quite commonly adopted. The Arians would stop women in the street and ask them, did they ever have a son before giving birth to one?<sup>1</sup> According to Gregory Nyssen, if you asked the baker for the price of his bread, he would reply that the Son was created out of nothing, and when you inquired if the bath was ready, you would be informed that the Father is greater than the Son, and the Son subject to the Father. Then there was Apollinaris, a bishop, who maintained that the divine intelligence in Christ superseded the necessity of his having any other, human, intellect. And there was another bishop, Nestorius, who deprecated the use of the term "Mother of God," as applied to the Virgin Mary, because out of sheer ignorance, as the historian Socrates charitably accounts for it,<sup>2</sup> he deemed it blasphemous so to designate any woman. The Logos, he said, was not born of Mary, but at the moment when she conceived, it came down from heaven to dwell in her offspring as in a temple prepared for it by the Holy Ghost. Nor was it the Logos that suffered and died on Calvary, but only the human nature wherein it had taken up its abode. Such teaching, however, was abhorred by the antagonists of Nestorius as detracting not only from the greatness of Mary, but, indeed, from that of the divine Word as well, because it weakened the union of the latter with the flesh, thereby making its sacrifice for the redemption of mankind less awe-inspiring.<sup>3</sup> There were heretics of the stamp of Eunomius and the adherents of Macedonius, one time Bishop of Constantinople, declaring that the Holy Ghost did not participate in the divinity and creative power of the Father and the Son, but was himself a creature, although the only one of his kind, the first and highest of all created. The Macedonians even attempted to prove their assertion by pointing to the alleged use by the inspired writers of entirely different prepositions when speaking of the relations

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<sup>1</sup>Athanasius Or., I., 22.

<sup>2</sup>H. E., VII., 29 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Migne, XLVIII., 759 ff; *conf.* St. Cyril's Ep. 4, Migne, LXXVII., 45 ff.

to creation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. If these men were to be believed, of the Father, the sacred Scriptures say that all is *from* him (ἐκ πατρός); of the Son, that all is *by* him (διὰ τὸν υἱόν); of the Holy Ghost, that it is *in* him (ἐν πνεύματι). But, knowing as much about Greek prepositions as most people and a good deal more than the Macedonians, such rhetoricians as Basil and Gregory Nazianzen had an easy task indeed proving that the three prepositions in question were employed in the books of the New Testament not in the manner claimed by the heretics, but promiscuously; as, for instance, in Romans xi., 36, where they are all of them applied to the Son.<sup>1</sup>

The Fathers were indeed ever ready to give battle against the countless heresies that kept cropping out in the fourth and fifth centuries. Some one was sure to detect the enemy, and cry alarm on the spot. If it was not St. Athanasius, it might be one of the three Cappadocians—St. Basil, St. Gregory Nyssen, and St. Gregory Nazianzen—and if, later in the day, the whole world might seem for a while to be napping, St. Cyril of Alexandria would not fail to appear in the arena for order and persistency, a host in himself, and backed, moreover, by an army of Egyptian monks of an orthodoxy as steep and unbending as the obelisks of their country.

It should be remembered what these men had to contend with. Not every bishop, nor all monks, were men of solid learning and sound doctrine. The fact that at the so-called “Robber Synod” of Ephesus the bishop of Constantinople was kicked and clubbed almost to death by another bishop and numerous monks becomes still more regrettable when one considers that the kicking and clubbing were wholly unorthodox.

In the long run, however, dialectics proved more powerful by far than blows and stabs. Orthodoxy carried the day. But little did its champions suspect that through them spoke the Greek race, the last time practically for a thou-

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<sup>1</sup> Basil, *Contra Eunom.*, and *De Spiritu Sanctu*; Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 31.

sand years to come, to the whole of civilized Europe; spoke, indeed, in words that neither passed unheeded at the time, nor were allowed to remain barren in the ensuing course of years. The Greeks, who no longer, as of old, were capable of making beautiful epics, tragedies, statues, and histories, still retained enough of mental acumen and verbal facility to make ingenious dogmas. Of their peculiar national knack in this line the Fathers were perfectly conscious, and they were proud of it, too. "We do not profess belief in a *Jewish*, narrow, envious, weak Deity," exclaims Gregory Nazianzen,<sup>1</sup> and others of his countrymen express themselves in a kindred spirit. They were Greeks determined to make the Jews acknowledge that even though the Son of God had condescended to be born among them, it was not until the younger brothers of Plato got hold of Christianity and subjected it to a thorough philosophical treatment, that a system of Christian doctrine worthy of its sublime subject was constructed. And by the very fact that this construction was performed and might only be performed by means of philosophy and rhetoric, did these sciences obtain, as it were, rights of citizenship in the Christian community, from which, at the dawn of the new era, zealots had endeavored to bar them out as idolatrous abominations.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that even in the best patristic literature the degenerating of Hellenism into Byzantinism is unmistakable. But after all Byzantinism was a descendant that was ever proud and mindful of her glorious ancestress, and when at last occasion offered had a very effectual share in bringing about her resurrection.

JOAKIM REINHARD.

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<sup>1</sup>Or. 25, 16.

<sup>2</sup>Tertull., *De præscript. hæretic*, 8; *conf.* Hieronym., *Epist.* 12, 22, and *Apol. adv. Rufin*, I, toward the close.